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MERE BABIES LEARN TO WRITE

ITALIAN WOMAN GETS RESULTS WHICH ASTONISH.

Four-Year-Old Children Taught in About Six Weeks—They Do Not Know They Are Learning, but Think They Can Do It Just Because They Are Old Enough.

Maria Montessori is performing what seems almost a miracle in the education of certain children of Rome and Milan. Under her system of teaching it is a common thing for babies of 3 or 4 years old to learn to write in about six weeks. Children of 6 learn in a month and don't even know they are learning.

Maria Montessori is a woman of wide learning and unusual ability. In her opinion the only education worth having is aptitude. In the work carried on under her direction one great difficulty is to keep the teacher from rushing to the assistance of a child who seems puzzled or embarrassed in his little employment. The idea of rewards or of punishments is rigorously banished from the "houses of childhood" under her control.

Her methods are described at length in *McClure's Magazine*. She begins with very little children and first trains the sense of touch. She emphasizes the advantage of isolating the senses for the purpose of training. Education of the hearing, for example, can best be carried on in a room which is not only quiet but dark. The children are often blindfolded for training the sense other than that of sight. They become so keen that they can by mere touch tell a grain of millet from one of rice and can discriminate between coins, even those which are almost alike.

One day Maria Montessori happened to meet a mother carrying a little baby swaddled in the Italian fashion and half in jest she took it into the school room and held it up to the children as a model of placidity, immobility and noiselessness. As she enlarged on these characteristics the imitative instinct of the children asserted itself and they all fell to imitating the baby in absolute immobility.

The effect was marvellous, and ever since that day the "game of silence" has been one of the most popular in all the schools. The children when the game is to be played choose their seats. The teacher then goes quietly from one window to another, drawing the shutters together until twilight reigns in the room. Some of the little ones always cover their faces with their hands.

Others continue to wriggle and to move in their places until the whole room is a noisy confusion. Maria Montessori then leads into the vestibule. Then like a flock of young chickens going to rest even the most uneasy ones gradually quiet down and become expectant and serious, to await the ever renewed mystery.

When perfect silence has stolen over the assembly, so perfect that the ticking of a miniature clock in the room can be distinctly heard, the teacher calls a name in a faint whisper. "Giovanni." Giovanni rises as quietly as he can from his little chair and tiptoes out of the room into the vestibule.

It is now his turn to be the "baby." He must feel himself the object of young boys' black looks, for every one is trying to hear the name "Giovanni," which is being murmured by the teacher. Lucia is more quiet in her movements than Giovanni. "Giuseppe," the teacher next softly calls, and a funny little boy silently joins the others in the hall.

She continues to call in a mysterious whisper until a dozen bambini have stolen out noiselessly and solemnly. Then the game is over. Nothing that favors of prolonged mental tax is permitted to be continued for any length of time in the "houses of childhood." Those who have remained in their places will get the chance to show how stealthily they can leave the room the next time the game of silence is played. When the game is ended the shutters are opened and the tongues begin to wag again; but the game has calmed all excitability. Sometimes they ask for it twice a day.

It was during the vacation of July, 1907, after the school had been opened for six months, that Maria Montessori was first induced to consider the instruction of children in writing and reading. Her interest in having been strongly attracted to the idea of writing, she began to teach the immature brains of children under 7.

Her first request came from the children themselves. Some of the more precocious young aspirants to the higher learning ardently drew an O on the blackboard several times to convince the teacher of their capacity. Then some of the more timid ones came forward and said that as their children learned everything at the Casa dei Bambini with ease, they could not understand why they should not learn to write. They were in the elementary school, it could not be half so easy.

She said she did not want to teach writing to children who were not ready. They had not learned the forms of the letters, and she had large models of coarse black

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